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Race Relations in America: Complacency All Along?

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To the outside viewer who is unfamiliar with the history of race relations in the United States, the February 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, or the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri by a white police officer may seem like isolated events or simply a mishap that occurred for an unfortunate individual during his encounter with a member of law enforcement. One might also question the necessity and appropriateness of the media outrage that ensued after these incidents, and in the case of the Michael Brown shooting, the ongoing protests and violent civil unrest that emerged in the city of Ferguson as well as other parts of the nation. But Americans are all too familiar with the historical role that race has played in structuring all aspects of society, culture and politics. In fact, racial bias is a deeply embedded attribute of American society that has existed since the founding of our nation. No doubt that in the past half century significant racial progress has been achieved through court decisions and legislative actions. Gallup polls over the past fifty years have demonstrated how overt racial hostility, civil rights for African Americans, and race relations have been gradually improving. Other economic indicators such as the income and wage gap between blacks and whites, educational attainment rates, and white-on-black crime rates also reveal progress in racial inequities to a certain degree. Despite these achievements however, the two incidents cited above and the response that followed expose the ongoing racial dilemma that America continues to face.

Nicholas Winter's *Dangerous Frames* explores the ways in which citizens' underlying preconceptions of race and gender can influence their attitudes about carefully framed political issues that do not overtly deal with either category. This book has previously elicited a number of reviews that address the author's question from various perspectives including public opinion framing, political judgment and group attitudes, race and gender relations, and group conflict. Rather than review the book from a different theoretical angle, this essay revisits the author's central theme in light of recent events that emerged after the deaths of unarmed black men by law enforcement personnel. In particular, the police response to growing protests in Ferguson, Missouri with military-grade riot gear and armored trucks has sparked heated debate about police use of force doctrines as well as the relationship between law enforcement organizations and African-Americans. Such crises serve to demonstrate how race continues to elicit strong emotional and normative responses from the public, and shatters the underlying sense of complacency about improved race relations in American society.

Winter's book explores the conditions under which frames, defined as a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them", can associate an issue with latent notions of race and gender and so affect citizens' opinion of that issue (21). The author draws from the field of

psychology to demonstrate the process of “group implication, which is the process by which an issue frame can engage a person’s ideas about social categories to shape public opinion” (19). Race and gender are selected as two cases of stratification systems that have been used to delineate appropriate relationships among individuals and between individuals and groups. Throughout history, humans have understood the biological attributes of race and gender to reflect natural differences among individuals, and therefore, societies have used them to develop systems of hierarchy and classification. The author discusses how such distinctions are rather arbitrary social constructions in which different societies confer different notions about categorizing people, proscribe proper attributes and behaviors to categories, and even suggest appropriate relationships among individuals and groups. As briefly illustrated from the author’s own childhood classroom experience in chapter one, children are socialized from early on to recognize race and gender differences and to act accordingly, and these distinctions become even more important for adults in the comprehension of social and political issues.

Chapters two and three articulate the theory of group implication where underlying notions or beliefs about a concept can be mapped upon unrelated domains or areas of knowledge to shape public opinion. The author demonstrates how group implication is a form of reasoning by analogy where people seek to comprehend unfamiliar subjects or events by way of referring to familiar domains of experience. This process of understanding new phenomena also extends to include normative judgments or evaluations about them. In terms of political issues, the use of different analogies imply distinct policy preferences among individuals or groups, which has important political consequences depending on who has the upper hand in deciding the outcome. The process of unconsciously engaging people’s predispositions to influence opinion can only occur under the right conditions, namely, when political discourse is deliberately framed in a way that effectively draws upon latent assumptions about race or gender. Winter builds upon this point to argue how political elites engage in communication that taps into these cognitive preconceptions to affect opinion and promote a particular policy course.

Chapter four contains experimental evidence on race and gender group implication on a randomized group of individuals. The author artificially constructs newspaper articles about three political issues of grandparent-child visitation rights, social security privatization and government involvement in the economy. Each of the articles in turn consist of a baseline condition, a race condition and a gender condition. The race and gender conditions are framed to fit each respective schema, and they were designed in a subtle way that do not contain any explicit references to the categories. After reading the articles, participants answered questions about their opinions on each issue as well as additional questions that measure race, gender and various other political predispositions. The findings reveal that the subtle framing of issues which match the cognitive structure of race and gender schemas lead to significant changes in participants’ opinions about the issue. These results demonstrate the causal mechanisms between the existence of cognitive structures and the framing of an issue that lead people to evaluate it in terms of their racial or gender predispositions.

The author devotes chapter five and six to a statistical analysis of survey data on welfare, social security and health care reform. Chapter five provides an overview of how demographic shifts, civil rights movements and media coverage of poverty resulted in the framing of welfare and social security. The author discusses the set of events that led welfare to become associated with laziness, lack of personal responsibility and perverse incentives, attributes that have been symbolically associated with blackness. Meanwhile,

social security has been linked with hard work and legitimately earned benefits, values that are symbolically associated with whiteness. Based on this assertion, the author conducts an analysis of national survey data from 1984 to 2000 to demonstrate how white Americans associate welfare and social security with race by examining the difference in levels of support between racially conservative and racially liberal whites. The overall findings reveal that racial conservatives, or those who feel warmly towards whites as a group, are more supportive of social security spending, while racial liberals are more supportive of welfare policies. Chapter six examines survey data for the 1993-94 debates on the Clinton health care reform issue. Based on the assumption that the health care debate was framed in ways that unconsciously associated the issue with people's cognitive gender structures, the author demonstrates how gender traditionalists were more opposed to reform than gender egalitarians, and that gender-traditionalists even among Democrats were moved to resist the reform plan. These results provide a clear illustration that group implication occurs when issue framing by political elites matches the racial and gender schemas of the mass public.

The book's greatest strength lies in empirically verifying the process of group implication through experimentation and statistical analysis of survey data. The results of the laboratory experiment affirm the causal mechanisms behind cognitive racial and gender structures and the framing of issues to opinion. The analysis of national survey data on the welfare, social security and health care reform debates complement the experiment in terms of wider generalizability of the results by demonstrating that the American public associate these issues with their racial and gender schemas, and that political elites succeed in framing issues that elicit the cognitive structures of the mass public to shape opinion.

However one area of further development could be to address the antecedents of the public's cognitive structures that politicians tap into and employ for shaping opinion. As aforementioned, it is not that physical attributes in themselves contain any objective biological meaning, but rather it is because societies have imposed normative prescriptions about race and gender as well as the appropriate relationships and behaviors between different groups. The structures must have been shaped by some previous forces in the past that enabled people to develop their cognitive notions about race or gender. Political elites can then frame issues in advance that unconsciously trigger those cognitive structures. But what about issues that are not susceptible for framing beforehand, such as the shootings of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown? These are obviously not major policies that political elites can prepare for in advance. Was the "militarization" of the police in response to protests in Ferguson, Missouri necessary? Would the police have responded differently if the majority of protestors were white? If we accept the findings from Winter's book, then could we say that the reactions of the police, at least those who ordered the militarized responses, imply something about their underlying notion of race? These and other issue raises the question of whether the framing of cognitive schema, as opposed to issue framing, might be occurring even today where African-Americans and other minorities continue to be negatively perceived in the cognitive structures of many Americans.

Dangerous Frames is an influential book containing persuasive empirical evidence that can contribute to theory building in terms of opinion framing, political judgment, and race and gender issues. There is also value for practice in that the book enables us to shed light on current issues that emerge abruptly and to question whether some of the responses to these crises require us to reexamine our perception of race as well as the overall status of race relations in America.

Author's Biography

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Reference

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